

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SOURCE OF ELIJAH'S STRENGTH

(I Kings 17)

THIS chapter begins with the conjunction “**And**”; it is, therefore, an addition to what has gone before; and it is God's addition. When we have read to the end of the previous chapter - which tells the melancholy story of the rapid spread and universal prevalence of idolatry in the favored land of the Ten Tribes - we might suppose that that was the end of all; and that the worship of the Lord would never again acquire its lost prestige and power.

And, no doubt, the principal actors in the story thought so too.

- Ahab thought so;
- Jezebel thought so;
- The false prophets thought so;
- The scattered remnant of hidden disciples thought so.

But they had made an unfortunate omission in their calculations - they had left out the Lord Himself. He must have something to say, at such a crisis. He must add a few chapters before the history is closed. When men have done their worst, and finished, it is the time for God to begin.

And when God begins. He is likely, with one blow, to reverse all that has been done without Him; and to write some pages of human history which will be a lesson and an inspiration to all coming time. That “**And**” is ominous enough to His foes; but it is full of hope and promise to His friends.

Things were dark enough. After the death of Solomon, his kingdom split into two parts - the southern under Rehoboam, his son; the northern under Jeroboam, who had superintended the vast public works. Jeroboam was desperately eager to keep his hold on his people; but he feared to lose it, if they continued to go, two or three times in the year, to the annual feasts at Jerusalem. He thought that old associations might overpower their new-born loyalty to himself.

He resolved, therefore, to set up the worship of the Lord in his own territories, and erected two temples, one at Dan, in the extreme north, the other at Bethel, in the extreme south.

And in each of these he placed a golden calf, that the God of Israel might be worshiped “under the form of a calf that eateth hay.”

This sin broke the second commandment - which forbade the children of Israel to make any graven image, or to bow down before the likeness of anything in heaven above, or in the earth beneath. So weak and sinful a bid for popularity is never forgotten in Holy Scripture. Like a funeral knell, the words ring out again and again: “**Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.**”

After many revolutions and much bloodshed, the kingdom passed into the hands of a military adventurer, Omri. The son of this man was Ahab, of whom it is said, “**He did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.**” This came to pass, not so much because his character was more depraved, but because he was a weak man, the tool of a crafty, unscrupulous, and cruel woman; and some of the worst crimes that have ever been committed have been wrought by weak men, at the instigation of worse - but stronger - spirits than themselves.

When the young and beautiful Jezebel left the ceiled palaces of Tyre, to become the consort of the newly-crowned king of Israel, it was no doubt regarded as a splendid match. Tyre at that time sat as queen upon the seas, in the zenith of her glory: her colonies dotted the shores of the Mediterranean as far as Spain; her ships whitened every sea with their sails, and ventured to the coasts of our own Cornwall for tin; her daughter, Carthage, nursed the lion-cub Hannibal, and was strong enough to make Rome tremble. But, like many a splendid match, it was fraught with misery and disaster. No one can disobey God's plain words against intermarriage with the ungodly without suffering for it at last.

As she left her palace-home, Jezebel would be vehemently urged by the priests - beneath whose influence she had been trained, and who, therefore, exercised an irresistible spell over her - to do her utmost to introduce into Israel the hideous and cruel rites of her hereditary religion.

Nor was she slow to obey. First, she seems to have erected a temple to Astarte in the neighborhood of Jezreel, the Windsor of the land, and to have supported its four hundred and fifty priests from the revenues of her private purse. Then Ahab and she built a temple for Baal in Samaria, the capital of the kingdom, large enough to contain immense crowds of worshipers (II Kings 10:21).

Shrines and temples then began to rise in all parts of the land in honor of these false deities; whilst the altars of the Lord, like that at Carmel, were ruthlessly broken down. The land swarmed with the priests of Baal and of the groves - proud of Court favor; glorying in their sudden rise to power; insolent, greedy, licentious, and debased. The fires of persecution were lit, and began to burn with fury.

The schools of the prophets were shut up; grass grew in their courts. The prophets themselves were hunted down, and slain by the sword. “**They wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented;**” so much so, that the pious Obadiah had the greatest difficulty in saving a few of them, by hiding them in the limestone caves of Carmel, and feeding them at the risk of his own life.

The whole land seemed apostate. Of all the thousands of Israel, only seven thousand remained who had not bowed the knee or kissed the hand of Baal. But they were paralyzed with fear, and kept so still that their very existence was unknown by Elijah in the hour of his greatest loneliness.

Such times have often come, fraught with woe: false religions have gained the upper hand; iniquity has abounded; and the love of many has waxed cold. So was it when the Turk swept over the Christian communities of Asia Minor, and replaced the Cross by the crescent. So was it when over Europe, Roman Catholicism spread as a pall of darkness that grew denser as the dawn of the Reformation was on the point of breaking. So it was in the last century, when Moderatism reigned in Scotland, and apathy in England.

But God is never at a loss. The land may be overrun with sin; the lamps of witness may seem all extinguished; the whole force of the popular current may run counter to His truth; and the plot may threaten to be within a hair's breadth of entire success; but all the time He will be preparing a weak man in some obscure highland village, and in the moment of greatest need will send him forth, as His all-sufficient answer to the worst plottings of His foes. **“When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.”** So it has been, and so it shall be again.

Elijah was of the inhabitants of Gilead.

Gilead lay east of the Jordan; it was wild and rugged; its hills were covered with shaggy forests; its awful solitudes were only broken by the dash of mountain streams; its valleys were the haunt of fierce wild beasts.

“What the highlands of Argyleshire and Inverness were a century ago to the lowland towns of Scotland, that must Gilead have been to the more refined and civilized people of Jerusalem and Samaria.”

The inhabitants of Gilead partook of the character of their country - wild, lawless, and unkempt. They dwelt in rude stone villages, and subsisted by keeping flocks of sheep.

Elijah grew up like the other lads of his age. In his early years he would probably do the work of a shepherd on those wild hills.

As he grew to manhood, his erect figure, his shaggy locks, his cloak of camel's hair, his muscular, sinewy strength - which could outstrip the fiery coursers of the royal chariot, and endure excessive physical fatigue - distinguished him from the dwellers in lowland valleys; but in none of these would he be specially different from the men who grew up with him in the obscure mountain hamlet of Tishbe, whence he derived the name of Tishbite. There were many amongst them as lithe, and swift, and strong, and capable of fatigue, as he. We must not look to these things for the secret of his strength. As he grew in years, he became characterized by an intense religious earnestness. He was **“very jealous for the Lord God of hosts.”**

Deeply taught in Scripture, especially in those passages which told how much the Lord had done for His people, Elijah yearned, with passionate desire, that they should give Him His meed of honor. And when he learnt that this was lacking - as the dread tidings came, by broken snatches, of what was transpiring across the Jordan; as messenger after messenger told how Jezebel had thrown down God's altars, and slain His prophets, and replaced them by the impious rites of her Tyrian deities - his blood ran liquid fire; his indignation burst all bounds; he was **“very jealous for the Lord God of hosts.”**

O noble heart! would that we could be as righteously indignant, amid the evils of our time! Oh for a coal from that pure flame that burnt on thine inner hearth!

But the question was, How should he act? What could he do - a wild, untutored child of the desert? There was only one thing he could do - the resource of all much-tried souls - he could pray; and he did: "**He prayed earnestly**" (James v. 17). And in his prayer he seems to have been led back to a denunciation made years before by Moses to the people - that if they turned aside and served other gods, and worshiped them, the Lord's wrath would be kindled against them; and He would shut up the heaven, that there should be no rain (Deuteronomy 11:17).

Flowing into this mold, his thoughts must have shaped themselves somewhat thus: "If my God does not fulfill this threat the people will think that it is an idle tale, or that He is a myth of the past - a dead tradition. This must not be. Better far that the land should suffer the terrors of famine, and the people experience the bitterest agonies of thirst, and that I should be torn limb from limb. It were better that we should suffer the direst physical woes that can blast our national prosperity, than that we should come to think that the Lord of our fathers is as dead as the idols of the heathen."

And so he set himself to pray that the terrible threat might be literally fulfilled. "**He prayed earnestly that it might not rain.**"

A terrible prayer indeed! Granted; and yet, was it not more terrible for the people to forget and ignore the God of their fathers, and to give themselves up to the licentious orgies of Baal and Astarte? Remember, too, what a wrong construction might be put upon the utter silence of God Himself. Could anything be more disastrous than that the statute-book should be filled with laws which the Law-giver could not or would not enforce? Nothing could be more detrimental to the true conception of God.

"These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee and set them in order before thine eyes."

Physical suffering is a smaller calamity than moral delinquency.

And the love of God does not shrink from inflicting such suffering, if, as a result, the plague of sin may be cut out as a cancer, and stayed. It may be, reader, that this is why there is so much sorrow in thy life.

Thou art suffering a terrible drought, before which all the springs of thy prosperity are drying up. No dews of grace or rains of blessing have fallen to thy lot for many days. This is not a chance; it is the work of One who loves thee too well to permit thee to forsake Himself without making one effort to arrest and change thee.

The corn-field is fired only because He wants to bring thee to Himself (II Samuel 14:30). The drought is sent only to enforce the rebuilding of the altar on Carmel's height, and the immolation of the false priests in the vale beneath.

And as Elijah prayed, the conviction was wrought into his mind that it should be even as he prayed; and that he should go to acquaint Ahab with the fact. Whatever might be the hazard to himself, both king and people must be made to connect their calamities with the true cause.

And this they evidently did, as we shall see (I Kings 18:10). That the drought was due to his prayer is also to be inferred from the express words with which Elijah announced the fact to the king: “**There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.**”

What a meeting was that! We know not where it took place - whether in the summer palace, when Jezebel was at her consort's side, or when Ahab was surrounded by his high officers of state in Samaria. But wherever it took place, it was a subject worthy of the highest art and genius. The old religion against the new; the child of nature against the effeminate child of courts; camel's hair against soft clothing; moral strength against moral weakness.

This interview needed no ordinary moral strength. It was no child's play for the untutored child of the desert to go on such an errand to that splendid court! What chance was there of his escaping with his life? Surely he would not fare better than the prophets, who had not dared so much as he! Yet he went and came unhurt, in the panoply of a might which seemed invulnerable.

What was the secret of that strength?

If it can be shown that it was due to something inherent in Elijah, and peculiar to himself; some force of nature; some special quality of soul, to which ordinary men can lay no claim - then we may as well close our inquiries, and turn away from the inaccessible heights that mock us. But if it can be shown, as I think it can, that this splendid life was lived not by its inherent qualities, but by sources of strength which are within the reach of the humblest child of God who reads these lines, then every line of it is an inspiration, beckoning us to its own glorious level. Courage, brothers! There is nothing in this man's life which may not have its counterpart in ours, if only it can be established that his strength was obtained from sources which are accessible to ourselves.

Elijah's strength did not lie in himself or his surroundings. He was of humble extraction. He had no special training. He is expressly said to have been “**a man of like passions**” with ourselves. When, through failure of faith, he was cut off from the source of his strength, he showed more craven-hearted cowardice than most men would have done; he lay down upon the desert sands, asking to die. When the natural soil of his nature shows itself, it is not richer than that of the majority of men; and, if anything, it is the reverse.

Elijah gives us three indications of the Source of his strength.

(1) “**As the Lord liveth**”

To all beside, the Lord might seem dead; but to him he was the one supreme reality of life. And if we would be strong, we too must be able to say: “**I know that my Redeemer liveth; He ever liveth to make intercession for us; and because He lives, we shall live also.**”

- The death of the Cross was bitter, but He liveth;
- The spear made fearful havoc, but He liveth;
- The grave was fast closed, but He liveth;
- Men and devils did their worst, but He liveth.

The man who has heard JESUS say, “**I am He that liveth,**” will also hear Him say, “**Fear not! be strong, yea, be strong.**”

(2) **“Before whom I stand.”**

He was standing in the presence of Ahab; but he was conscious of the presence of a greater than any earthly monarch, even the presence of the Lord, before whom angels bow in lowly worship, harkening to the voice of His word. Gabriel himself could not employ a loftier designation (Luke 1:19).

Let us cultivate this habitual recognition of the presence of God; it will lift us above all other fear.

Let us build our cottage so that every window may look out on the mighty Alps of God's presence; and that we may live, and move, and have our being, beneath the constant impression: **“Lo, God is here.”**

Besides this, a conviction had been borne in upon his mind that he was chosen by God, as His called and recognized servant and messenger; and in this capacity he stood before Him.

(3) The word **“Elijah”** means - *the Lord is my God*; but there is another possible translation - *the Lord is my Strength*.

This gives the key to his life. God was the strength of his life; of whom should he be afraid? When the wicked, even his enemies and foes, came on him to eat up his flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though an host should encamp against him, his heart should not fear. What a revelation is given us in this name!

Oh that it were true of each of us! Yet, why should it not be? Let us from henceforth cease from our own strength, which at the best is weakness; and let us appropriate God's by daily, hourly faith. Then this shall be the motto of our future lives: **“In the Lord have I righteousness and strength; I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me; the Lord is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation.”**

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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